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ABSTRACT

Performance in drama, dance, music, puppetry, or combinations of these arts can be an exciting encounter for young children. This case study investigated one 4-year-old's responses to a children's opera. Her responses before, during, and after the performance were systematically observed and analyzed. Data showed that the child had some knowledge of the conventions of opera and performance before the show. Overall, she was attentive to the performance, with periodic mental diversions not appearing to affect her understanding of the show's narrative. Some aspects of the performance seemed to evoke particularly animated responses, such as puppets and dancing. The child appeared to identify strongly with the central character, a little girl, and during the performance, she also engaged in spontaneous drawing of what she observed on stage. A post-performance opportunity to explore the stage and props and to talk to performers indicated that the experience had been a positive one for the child; she interacted with many new people and did not want to leave. Several weeks after the performance, her play-acting revealed an influence of the opera, and she composed a song dealing with the opera's narrative. These observations suggested that quality performance experiences may have the potential to stimulate children to generate their own original, artistic responses. (Suggestions for appropriate inclusion of performances in early childhood education are provided. Contains 21 references.) (EV)

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AN EXAMINATION OF A YOUNG CHILD'S RESPONSES TO PERFORMANCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR ARTS CURRICULA.

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ABSTRACT

Performances in the arts for child audiences may offer experiences beyond those available in educational settings and homes. This case study of one four-year-old child describes her responses to a children's opera. The child's responses before, during, and after the performance were systematically observed and analysed. Based on these results, the study offers some practical strategies for those planning arts performance experiences for young children.

INTRODUCTION

Performance in drama, dance, music, puppetry or combinations of these arts can be an exciting encounter for young children. Arts performances often have powerful and long-lasting effects on children. Nevertheless the impact of performance on young children is an area in which there has been little reported research. The importance of performance experiences for children is maintained by writers including Andress (1980), Smigeil (1993) and Suthers (1993). They stress the importance of the performance acknowledging the developmental levels of its child audience and suggest introducing 'such minimal concert courtesies as applauding and appropriate listening' (Andress, 1980:180). Writers including Beaty (1996), Chenfeld (1995), Holt (1989) and Larkin (1994) affirm the importance of providing opportunities for children to encounter real life experiences, cultural rituals of society and to go beyond the perimeters of their homes and educational settings. Piscitelli (1991) believes that '...when this opportunity can be taken in a spirit of joyful enthusiasm, children, as connoisseurs of life, have a tremendous amount to gain' (p.214).

This case study examines the responses of a young child to such a performance, an opera for children. The opera *Grandma's shoes* is an Australian work which was first performed in Sydney in 1995. Based on a children's book of the same name, the libretto was by the book's author Libby Hathorn, music composed by Graeme Koehne and the production was directed and designed by Kim Carpenter from Theatre of Image. The performance combined music, drama, literature, movement, puppetry and visual arts.

DESIGN

By attending a performance of *Grandma's shoes* with a young child and his or her parent/s, the researchers planned to gather data related to a range of questions:

- Would the child react to the performance venue?
- How would the child respond during the performance?
- What kind of post-performance responses would the child display?
- Would the child respond to aspects of the performance at later times; and if so what form or forms would these responses take?

The use of a case study as a research methodology is endorsed by Burns (1994), Klein (1990), Merriam (1988), Silverman (1992) and Yin (1989). Yin (1989) defines a case study as 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context; when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used' (p.23). This study uses a single-case holistic

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design (Yin, 1989:46–50). The subject chosen for the study was to be a 'typical case selection' (Merriam, 1988:50); a four-year-old who had been taken by family member/s to performances.

The subject selected was Sarah, aged four years and 10 months. She attended a day care centre five days each week. Sarah was chosen because she was representative of those four-year-old children observed by the researchers, who were both enrolled in an educational setting, and had had some experience of performance attendance. Sarah had attended concerts at her older brother's school and a Wiggles concert. She had also been learning the piano for six months and had attended piano recitals at her teacher's studio.

Prior and post-performance, the main methods of data collection were semi-structured interviews (Burns, 1994) with Sarah's mother, Alex and Sarah's day care teacher, Marjorie. During the performance and immediately before and after it, data were collected by the researchers using a performance observation schedule. The researchers logged the child's responses, time sampling at five-minute intervals. They observed the child's visual engagement with performance; physical responses (such as moving or clapping); physical positioning on chair; verbal responses; and any additional responses (unanticipated behaviours).

A profile of Sarah's development across a range of domains was compiled on the basis of a number of semi-structured interviews with Sarah's mother and her day care teacher. Sarah was the younger of two children from an Anglo Australian family living in a middle class suburb of Sydney. Both her parents were engaged in fulltime professional work. Sarah's physical development was normal and she enjoyed good health. She enjoyed stories read to her at home and day care, and was able to recall major events of the narrative and their sequence. Sarah spoke clearly and confidently and conversed happily with her family, friends and strangers. Playing with words and inventing rhymes and songs were characteristic behaviours. She also remembered the words of songs, even those with several verses, easily and accurately.

CASE STUDY

A week prior to the performance Sarah's mother, Alex, explained the forthcoming visit to the opera. Her briefing was minimal explaining to her daughter the nature of opera and a precis of the plot that consisted entirely of 'it's a story about a little girl and her grandma who's died'. This scant preparation was not by design — Alex was not familiar with the book or the opera. However, Alex reported that Sarah did not ask any questions and was simply excited by the idea of an outing.

The performance was held in the Joan Sutherland Room at the Australian Opera Centre on Saturday, October 21, 1995, at two o'clock. The space was very large with a high ceiling. The area used for the performance was L-shaped and the remaining portion of the room was set up with rows of chairs. The stage area set up for the performance was in full view and accessible to the audience. There were two beds each covered in white fabric. One piled up with pillows was the little girl's and the other was Grandma's. Grandma's personal effects including gloves, stockings, brush and dentures were made from paper and arranged on her bed. Off to one side was a piano and the area for the musicians. Three water colour paintings of scenes from the opera were displayed on wooden easels at the entrance to the room.

Child response to the performance venue

Prior to the performance Sarah showed some knowledge of the conventions of opera and performance. She explained that in opera '...the people don't talk, they only sing'. She also knew that 'you can have food before and after but you can't eat food when it's on'. When Sarah entered the performance space her eyes tracked around the entire area. She looked up and around the room as she followed her mother to the seats. Soon after she was seated Sarah knelt up on her chair and scanned the audience. On her own initiative she then left her seat

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and went to examine the props and stage area. She was able to identify some of Grandma's artefacts but not all. Sarah did not seek clarification of these unknown items.

Child response during the performance

The performance lasted 50 minutes. When the opera began Sarah was quite attentive. She had no negative reactions to the unfamiliar sounds of operatic voices despite their volume and strong vibrato. From time to time Sarah's focus of attention seemed to wander to things in the performance venue that attracted her, such as the large bank of windows on one side of the room. After some time away, she would refocus on the performance. These mental diversions did not appear to hamper her understanding of the narrative. In a manner similar to the child, who during a story appears to be inattentive and distracted, but is able to retell the plot in detail afterwards, Sarah's understanding of the opera did not seem to be affected by her apparent variations in attentiveness. Nor was there any observable change in her levels of engagement as the performance proceeded; she did not become more restless or less attentive as time passed.

Some aspects of the performance seemed to evoke particularly animated responses from Sarah. She sat forward in her seat, transfixed by the action. Whenever the puppets were used or there was movement or dancing Sarah watched with rapt attention. Highly dramatic moments such as when the little girl first put on her Grandma's shoes and visually interesting staging such as a singer perched atop a 2-metre high ladder were obviously fascinating for Sarah.

Sarah also appeared to identify strongly with the little girl, the central character. Wilson (1985) states that '... individual members of the audience may identify with one character more than others, usually the character that appeals as being most like their actual selves or their ideal selves...' (p.55). Sarah's emotional involvement with the character of the little girl seemed to increase sharply in the second scene in which the mother sat on the bed and sang a lullaby to her daughter. Sarah clearly identified with this and could relate it to her own experience. By contrast, the opening scene, Grandma's funeral, interested her but was outside her own experience.

The researchers observed that at no time did Sarah question either them or her mother about any aspect of the performance. She occasionally made comments in a stage whisper, such as 'They're Grandma's shoes'.

During the performance Sarah also spontaneously drew. This was an unanticipated activity. Perhaps she was inspired by the researchers' constant note taking, or the model of the watercolours displayed for the audience to view. Sarah leant across and asked one of the researchers for pen and paper. She made two drawings of the performance, the first was a quick sketch and the second was similar, depicting most of the same objects but in far greater detail. Duncum (1993) found that the practice of making several visual representations of the same subject matter was common with children of this age. Sarah's more detailed second drawing appears as Figure 1.

The drawing shows her depiction of the little girl in her bedroom. Sarah volunteered labels for the features of her visual representation. The little girl's bed is at the bottom left and Grandma's bed is at the top right. The other objects are all Grandma's belongings. Clockwise from bottom right they are her dentures, glove, stockings, lamp and globe which Sarah confidently explained was 'a circle with a map in it'. This drawing is very much a visual record of Sarah's observations and is not unlike some young children's early map making endeavours (Perry & Conroy, 1994).

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Figure 1: Sarah's second drawing

Whilst the framing was not usual in Sarah's drawings, her teacher reported that representations of the sun were common in Sarah's drawings at day care. It is possible that Sarah drew the frame to signify the performance space or to represent some notion that the performance was outside her usual experiences. Similarly the birds around the border may have been inspired by the paper puppet birds that flew out of a book during the performance or they may simply be patterning.

At the end of the performance Sarah applauded along with the rest of the audience, again displaying some knowledge of performance conventions such as those discussed by Cohen (1988) and O'Neill (1988).

Child post-performance response

As in many children's performances, at the conclusion there was an opportunity for children to revisit the performing area and talk with the performers.

Sarah's first reaction was to go to the piano that had been used by the little girl at the very opening of the opera. Just as the little girl had done, Sarah knelt up on the piano stool and picked out notes on the keyboard. After replicating this aspect of the performance she played *Twinkle, twinkle* with one finger. Next she revisited the bedroom and along with other children carefully examined the paper props. Sarah did not ask any questions related to these props. This was very much sensory exploration of the props with no re-enactment from the performance.

Sarah then began to talk with some of the performers. This enabled her to confirm their existence outside their roles in the performance. For Sarah, most of the debriefing was social interaction rather than a series of opportunities to seek meaning about the performance. She did speak to the singer who had been on top of the ladder — 'You were on the ladder,' then 'Why were you up on the ladder?'

In talking with performers and the researchers during this post-performance time, Sarah had clear recollections of significant aspects of the production, knowledge of the main characters

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and a reasonable understanding of the narrative. Her only disappointment was that the singer who had been the little girl in the opera was not available to talk with her during the debriefing.

The researchers concluded that the experience had been a positive one for Sarah; she was happy and confident, she interacted with many new people and she was excited by the event. When Alex told her it was time to leave, Sarah did not want to go. She left smiling and waving to the performers with whom she had been talking and when one performer bent down to hug her goodbye, Sarah kissed her warmly and unselfconsciously.

Child response to the performance at later times

Over the week following the performance Sarah talked to her family about the opera and told her friends at day care about it. Her other response in the weeks following the performance, at home and at day care, was a strong desire to wear high heeled shoes during some play episodes. She had not done this previously. 'I wish you had golden shoes [with high heels] for me to wear,' she had told her mother two weeks after the opera.

Eight weeks after the performance, at Christmas, Sarah was given a copy of the book *Grandma's shoes* by her mother. This prompted lots of requests from Sarah for the book to be read but also a flurry of original songs and drawings. One of the songs appears as Figure 2. Sarah's words for her song were:

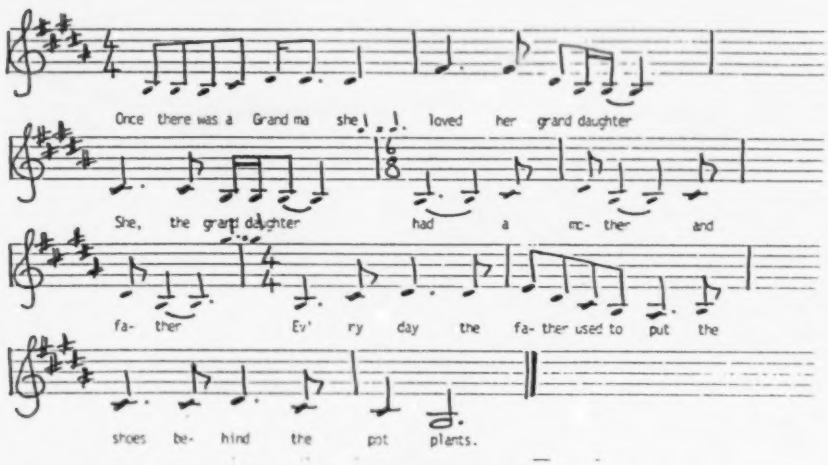
'Once there was a Grandma, she loved her granddaughter
She, the granddaughter, had a mother and father
Ev'ry day the father used to put the shoes behind the pot plants.'

Once there was a Grand ma she loved her grand daughter
She, the grand daughter had a mo- ther and
fa- ther Ev' ry day the fa- ther used to put the
shoes be- hind the pot plants.

Figure 2: Sarah's song

This song is clearly inspired by *Grandma's shoes*. The lyrics were improvised spontaneously by Sarah. This is clear from the second line when she sang 'she', Sarah obviously realised that this could be ambiguous and clarified it by adding 'the granddaughter'. This amendment in turn temporarily unsettled the metre (changing it from $^{4}_{4}$ to $^{6}_{8}$). The melody is original and not an adaptation of any standard song. It shows a well developed sense of tonality, remaining in B major throughout. There is also some effective melodic repetition — the opening of the song and the third line 'Every day...' and on 'a mother and father' use the same sequence of pitches — B, C♯, D♯. A clear sense of phrasing is also evident; there are three distinct lines of text matched with three clear melodic phrases.

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CONCLUSIONS

The researchers concluded that attendance at the performance of the children's opera *Grandma's shoes* had been an enjoyable experience for Sarah. She displayed interest in the performance environment — the room, the stage area, and the props. She was able to make sense of the basic storyline and characters of the opera, even though as a genre, opera was entirely new to her. While basically engaged with the performance Sarah's attention did wander from time to time, however, the use of puppetry or movement and dance brought her focus back to the production. She identified strongly with the little girl and familiar contexts and relationships associated with a family. The debriefing time after the performance allowed Sarah to meet with performers, explore the props in more detail and re-examine the performing space.

After the performance Sarah talked about the opera with her family and at day care. She incorporated wearing high-heeled shoes into her play. Two to three months after the performance she created a series of songs, raps and art work stimulated by *Grandma's shoes*.

Within the limits of a single child case study methodology there are nevertheless several aspects of performance which may be helpful to practitioners and parents/families in planning performance experiences for young children. The researchers' study of Sarah's responses to the performance experience highlighted a range of issues.

Firstly, some familiarity with performance conventions such as applauding, attending to the performers and generally remaining seated unless the production invites closer participation, may be useful. This accords with Andress's (1980) views on introducing young children to performance. Some familiarity with the basic story line or a song that will be performed may help young children relate more easily to the performance. Sarah's knowledge of the performance was minimal but appeared to be adequate preparation for her. Related to this issue is the selection of a particular performance. Again some component that strikes a familiar note with a child audience member may positively colour his/her response to the entire performance. Sarah appeared to identify strongly with the central character, the little girl, as well as responding to the familiarity of accustomed rituals such as preparing for bed.

It is difficult to prepare children for the performance environment as most venues are large and unlike homes and children's centres. Allowing the children to take in the space and the audience may help them feel more settled once the performance begins. Not all performance spaces are able to let children move around and explore the space as Sarah did, but allowing time for them to visually scan the location may be beneficial.

Some level of distractedness is to be anticipated when young children, particularly under fives, are watching a performance that may last 30, 40 or even 50 minutes. As long as the child is not disturbing other members of the audience, shifts in concentration away from the stage are probably to be expected. Some adults attending a play or concert report that their mind strays elsewhere. Mental time away from the performance action did not appear to adversely affect Sarah's enjoyment of the performance or her understanding of the opera.

An opportunity to debrief, to interact with performers, may assist in enhancing the child's experience of the performance. It can provide children with a chance to talk to performers, ask questions, seek clarification or simply interact. The chance to visit (or revisit) the performing area and handle the props, costumes or scenery may be a useful strategy for children attending performances. Such opportunities provide a context for the child to ask questions or enact components of the performance.

Quality performance experiences may have the potential to stimulate children to generate their own original, artistic responses. Sarah created drawings, songs and raps stimulated by *Grandma's shoes*. Less well equipped verbally than adults, young children may not be inclined to discuss their reactions but may well express themselves in other ways. Piscitelli (1991) notes in relation to young children's responses to visual arts that 'while verbal responses were prevalent, several other reactions were observed' (p.204). Reactions to art

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works included moving, making sounds and dramatic and imaginative play. Similarly, children may react to the performing arts by responses such as singing, puppeteering, painting, dramatic enactment, modelling with dough or clay or dancing.

While Sarah did some of the drawings during and soon after the performance, she did not begin to generate the songs until some weeks later. This may indicate that children's responses to performance continue after the event for some time as they pause, consider and reflect upon a performance experience, as many adults do. This view is supported by the work of Deriu (1985) and Henley (1993). Certainly casual anecdotal evidence would indicate that many adults who had the opportunity to experience a quality performance as young children still remember it vividly and talk of its lasting impact, and in some cases, the defining nature of one single occasion. It may be helpful in educational contexts then, for post-performance follow-up not to be confined to the days immediately after the performance. Provision for and nurturing of continued responses over weeks or even months may be useful in planning follow up activities.

As with all aspects of the early childhood curriculum, the engagement of parents and family with performance opportunities may enhance the experience for the young child. In this study, Sarah was clearly confident and relaxed at the opera performance. The presence of her mother would almost certainly have contributed to her feelings of well being and positive disposition towards the occasion. Clearly it is not always possible for working families to share in performances at their child's centre. However, for their role to be expanded beyond notification of performance times and payment for same, documentation of the event may be possible. The display of photographic records of children at the performance, the performance itself (if copyright permits), children's comments and post-performance responses such as enactment, drama play, dance or art work may stimulate parental fostering of at-home responses from the child. A video or audio recording of such responses would be a useful means of communicating to parents and families the children's ideas and reactions.

Finally to maximise the impact of performances on young children, their planning as an integral and integrated component of the arts curriculum would be beneficial. Preparation for the performance through drama, movement, music, storytelling and visual arts activities could be planned. Followup experiences afterwards would allow children to continue to reflect upon, work through and respond to the performance over time. By incorporating performance into the curriculum, the ensuing benefits for young children attending as audience members may well be maximised.

The arts of music, drama, dance and puppetry are often grouped together and labelled performing arts. These arts are live arts, based on the realisation of creative ideas by skilled performers. Performances are interactive to the extent that performers require performance opportunities with an audience, whose reactions impact on the performers. By introducing young children to performance in the arts, they can be acquainted not only with the conventions but also the magic of performance. Performers communicate in many ways — verbal and non-verbal, through the senses. As Harwood (1984) states, performance can evoke intense responses — cognitive, emotional, physical and social in audience members. Young children may express their reactions to a performance in diverse ways including laughing, crying, dancing, clapping, singing, drawing, dramatic play or by thinking about or creating their own original artistic responses. Sharing performances with young children can introduce them to the powerful impact of the arts; an impact that for some individuals may extend far beyond the early childhood years.

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